

# Thailand: Guidelines for the drug campaign

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The interior minister has announced he will revive the “war on drugs” of 2003. The prime minister has endorsed this proposal. The 2003 campaign resulted in around 3,000 deaths (2,921 according to the Kanit panel). There are some uncertainties about this figure, but that is the number which the government itself claimed. The current government has promised to be more careful in the execution of the policy, so perhaps it would help to establish some principles.

First, policy makers should not get involved in incitement to murder. When announcing the policy to governors and police chiefs in 2003, Thaksin referred to the results already achieved in two trial provinces: “Sometimes people were shot dead and had their assets seized as well. I think we have to be equally ruthless. If drug traders don’t stop, there is a chance they will be dealt with in every way, both life and limb.” He continued, “With the traders, you must use hammer and fist, that is, act decisively and without mercy. If some drug traders die, it will be a common thing.”

Seven weeks later, when over a thousand had already died, Thaksin repeated that drug dealers had only two choices—to go to jail or their own funerals.

It makes no difference whether the three thousand were killed by the police, by other drug dealers, or by the tooth fairy. Some people were being incited to kill other people. This should not be repeated this time round. Unfortunately the interior minister has already said it would be “natural” if even more died this time, so maybe it’s already too late.

Second, this same murderous intent should not be passed down the administrative chain. On 21 February 2003, the National Centre for Drug Suppression in the Ministry of Interior issued a document headed, “Policy and operational directives to overcome drug crimes.” This document ordered provincial governors and police chiefs to “suppress” 25 per cent of the names which had already been entered onto black lists. It specified, “Cases which may be set against the target are suppression of traders and manufacturers in three ways, namely arrest, extraordinary killing, or loss of life (death for various reasons).”

The Thai translated here as “extraordinary killing” is *wisaman katakam*, which means killing by officials in the course of duty, such as self-defence. However, the term is commonly applied to cases where the police take the law into their own hands (and, for that reason, is often mistranslated as “extrajudicial killing”). For good measure, the document adds the very vague idea of “loss of life” without apparent cause. Within the culture of the Thai police, it would be hard to avoid the obvious implications of an instruction worded in this fashion. This time around, the authorities should be more precise.

Third, the authorities should avoid the terrible simplicity of black lists. The local police were encouraged to draw up black lists as long as possible, and then incentivised (with money rewards) to eliminate as many of them as possible. While some of the names may have been suspected drug dealers, others probably qualified by being enemies of those drawing up the lists, or just simply defenceless. As the English journalist Andrew Marshall found, those at greatest risk were the innocents on these lists. If police pulled them in for questioning, they might prove their innocence and thus reduce the chance of the police reaching their numerical targets. The logical solution, as

some police admitted to Marshall, was to kill such innocents without questioning.

Such lists reduce people to anonymous figures, stripped of their humanity. The dead bodies displayed in news reports during the 2003 campaign were anonymous entries on a list rather than real warm people. Only when a young girl was killed by a stray bullet, and a courageous TV cameraman seized the opportunity to plead for his father's life, was this terrible anonymity breached. Maybe the prime minister and interior minister should ask around the Cabinet if any among the ministers had experience of being on those black lists.

Fourth, some effort is needed to prevent the emotions surrounding the subject of drugs overriding the principles of justice. Of the three thousand killed in 2003, around one half seem to have been totally innocent. That is the conclusion of Kanit na Nakhon's investigation. These killings were patently unjust. Among the other half, none were major traders. Most seem to have been petty dealers at the lowest level of the distribution chain. They may have been guilty, but did not warrant a sentence anywhere near the death penalty. The simple principle behind the campaign was to kill lots of little people in the hope of discouraging some of the big people behind the trade. In short, a deliberate blood sacrifice.

Many people supported the 2003 campaign. They seem to have accepted that this method was justified. But why is this method acceptable in the case of drugs, but not for other crimes?

Suppose for example that the prime minister had applied the same logic to the "war on corruption" which was announced in parallel with the "war on drugs." Suppose he had said, "If some corrupt people die, it will be a common thing." Suppose the authorities had drawn up black lists, and the Interior Ministry sent down an order for 25 per cent of the names to be eliminated by "arrest, extraordinary killing, or loss of life (death for various reasons)." People who then or since then have been accused of major corruption (land deals, hidden assets, fire truck purchases, airport scandals, wholesale vote-buying, etc., etc.) would have appeared on those black lists. And then....

Of course, that would be horrifying. But somehow the swirl of emotions created around the issue of drug-dealing allowed the police, provincial authorities, and ordinary observers to override basic justice and basic human empathy.

It's hard to be optimistic this time round. If the prime minister can imagine away the deaths in 1976...

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**P.S.**

\* <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/drugsagain.htm>